

I M MORTAL

By M.R. Alo

ImMORTAL

The Cost of Remembering Forever

A Novel

By **M.R.Alo**

“To live forever is not to never die

but to never be forgotten by the one who truly saw you.”
— *Elias Tala Navarro*

ImMORTAL: The Cost of Remembering Forever

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1st Edition

*For every creature that stayed too long in a world that kept forgetting it.
And for the daughters who will read this when they are old enough.*

Table of Contents

ACT ONE: Ang Nakaraang Hindi Patay (The Past That Is Not Dead)

- Chapter 1: The Confession
- Chapter 2: Intramuros, 1621
- Chapter 3: Batangas, 1944
- Chapter 3.5: The Night I Cannot Account For — [NEW]
- Chapter 4: UP Diliman, 1972
- Chapter 5: The Apartment
- Chapter 6: The LRT
- Chapter 7: Divisoria
- Chapter 8: Yes

ACT TWO: Ang Pag-Gising ng Dugo (The Awakening of Blood)

- Chapter 9: Intramuros
- Chapter 9.5: What She Didn't Say at the Museum — [NEW]
- Chapter 10: The National Museum
- Chapter 11: What She Wrote
- Chapter 12: Galan, Across the Street
- Chapter 12.5: Galan, Unraveling — [NEW]
- Chapter 13: Paco
- Chapter 14: Seventeen Photographs
- Chapter 15: Father Isagani
- Chapter 16: The Rooftop
- Chapter 17: Galan's Offer
- Chapter 18: What She Said Next
- Chapter 19: The Architecture of the War

ACT THREE: Ang Traydor (The Betrayer)

- Chapter 20: Amang Itim
- Chapter 21: Asog
- Chapter 22: Sinta
- Chapter 23: The City Goes Blind
- Chapter 24: The Sigbin
- Chapter 25: Ten Days
- Chapter 26: Kalingap
- Chapter 27: Diwata, Alone in the Car

Chapter 28: Miguel, and the Mistake

ACT FOUR: Ang Apoy na Hindi Susunog (The Fire That Will Not Burn)

Chapter 29: The Sanctuary

Chapter 30: What I Am

Chapter 30.5: The Fracture — [NEW]

Chapter 31: Sinta

Chapter 32: The River

Chapter 33: Leonora in the Water

Chapter 34: After

Chapter 35: What Amang Itim Said

ACT FIVE: Ang Ibig Sabihin ng Imortal (The Meaning of Immortal)

Chapter 36: The Waiting Room

Chapter 37: The Last Recording

Chapter 38: Twenty Years Later

Chapter 39: The Photograph of Leonora

Epilogue

Author's Note

Glossary of Filipino Lore

ACT ONE

Ang Nakaraang Hindi Patay
The Past That Is Not Dead

Chapter 1

The Confession

*“There is a man outside holding a cane of balete wood.
He has been standing in the courtyard for thirteen minutes.
He is not there for the filmmaker.
He is there to remind me that the clock he started twenty years ago is still running.”*

The chair is plastic. Wrong shade of blue.

The fluorescent light flickers every forty seconds. I have been counting. This is what four centuries produces: a man who cannot stop cataloguing every room he enters. Fifty-two. Fifty-three.

There is a man in the courtyard outside this building.

He arrived before I did — which means he followed me here. He holds a cane carved from balete wood, the sacred fig tree that every barangay in every province of this archipelago has always known houses things that should not be named carelessly. He is not leaning on the cane. He is holding it the way you hold something that broadcasts your nature. A signal, deliberately sent.

I know what he is.

A tikbalang — a horse-headed being, seven centuries old, who has lost every forest that was ever his. Not to war. To roads. To development. To the patient, indifferent expansion of a city that grew into the spirit world’s territory without ever acknowledging the territory existed. His name is Galan. I have known him since 1944, when I thought he was a contact I could trust. I understand now what he was collecting information for even then.

I know what he wants.

He wants the girl in the next room — the one who is right now arguing with the filmmaker’s landlord about natural light designations. I can hear her

through the wall: patient, warm, entirely certain. She is going to win. She always wins arguments she has thought about thoroughly, which is all of them.

Her name is Diwata Reyes. She is twenty years old. She is the last Bantay ng Dugo — the last Blood Watcher, the last of an eight-century lineage bred to maintain the balance between the human world and the spirit world of the Philippines. She does not know this about herself, or didn't until recently.

Galan needs her blood to complete a ritual he has been building for twenty years. A ritual designed to permanently alter the boundary between both worlds — to tear it open, or collapse one into the other, or end the long bloody stalemate between them. He has been very patient. He is done being patient.

If he gets what he wants, Manila becomes something unrecognizable. The millions of people going about their morning in this city right now — the vendors setting up on España, the jeepney drivers starting their routes, Aling Nena in Sampaloc probably already wondering why I haven't brought the empty bottles down — none of them know that the city they are living in is also, always, another city. One that exists in the same space at a different frequency. One that Galan intends to bring into violent contact with theirs.

This is the urgency the filmmaker across from me does not know about.

She has kind eyes. She is very patient. She has been waiting for me to start for fifty-three seconds and she is not showing any sign of needing me to hurry.

"Whenever you are ready," she says.

I look at the window. At the man with the balete-wood cane, very still in the courtyard. He is the reason I am in this chair instead of in a train to somewhere else under a new name. Not because I am afraid of him. Because she is in the next room arguing about light, and if I leave she faces him without me.

“Tala,” I say.

My name. My real one. Two hundred years since I’ve said it aloud.

It means star.

My father chose it for a creature belonging to neither the human world nor the spirit world — a name that lived in the space between the earth and everything beyond it. He was a silversmith in colonial Intramuros. He died in 1621. He was the best man I have ever known in four centuries of knowing people.

The man in the courtyard shifts his weight. He heard the name. His kind always hears the true names of things.

“My full name is Elias Tala Navarro,” I tell the camera. “I am four hundred and two years old. I appear to be twenty-two. And the reason I am telling you this is not because I have decided it’s safe to be honest.”

I pause.

“It’s because he needs her in a specific place on a specific night, and the night is close, and she needs to understand what she is before he gets to choose how she finds out.”

From the next room, a pause in the argument. A concession from the landlord. Then her voice again, gracious and definitive.

She won.

“Start anywhere,” the filmmaker says.

“I’ll start with a balete grove in 1600,” I say, “and a silversmith who asked a lost engkanto if she was alright. And I’ll work forward to now. And when I get to now, you’ll understand why a dead tree in a cemetery in Binondo has been waiting two hundred years for this specific conversation.”



Chapter 2

Intramuros, 1621

*“Excuse me. Are you alright?
My father was not a hero. He was a silversmith who asked an inconvenient question
and could not stop asking it once he had started.”*

The engkanto are the oldest beings of the Philippine archipelago. They inhabit the sacred fig trees, the rivers, the mountain passes. They are not ghosts — they predate the concept of ghosts. They are a different order of being entirely, older than the colonial names for things, older than the names for the names. When the Spanish arrived and tried to rename everything, the engkanto stayed. When the Americans arrived and tried to modernize everything, the engkanto stayed. They will be here after the last mall is built and abandoned.

My mother was one of them. Was being the operative word — by the time I was born she was in the late stages of becoming human, which is the fate engkanto most fear. The human world, if you stay in it long enough, domesticates you. You begin to age. You begin to want ordinary things. You begin to love people you will outlive.

She had been in the balete grove outside the old walls of Intramuros for three weeks when my father cut through it on a shortcut home.

He was late. He had been late his whole life, in the specific way of craftsmen who get absorbed in the work and lose track of everything else. He came through the grove because it was shorter and because he had always had the specific fearlessness of a man who had decided the more direct route was worth whatever was said about it.

He found a woman standing between two enormous trees and said, in the Tagalog of the period, very politely: “Excuse me. Are you alright?”

Not: what are you. Not: be gone.

Are you alright.

She told me this was the thing that undid her. In five hundred years of encountering humans, not one had led with practical concern.

“I am not sure,” she said.

“Are you lost?”

“Not in the way you mean.”

“Then in what way?”

She went home with him. I arrived nine months later. My mother left when I was seven because what she was becoming — the manananggal surfacing as the engkanto receded, the nightly separations, the hunting — was not something she could protect me from if she stayed. She left at dawn. My father raised me alone.

He never remarried. He never, as far as I know, stopped loving her. He also never pretended the situation was different from what it was.

“You are a question that God has not yet decided how to answer,” he told me once, tapping the side of my head.

I have been living inside that sentence for four hundred years. I’ve decided he was right: there is no answer. There is only the question, lived out.

Father Alejandro documented our family for six months before he moved against us. He had kind eyes and genuine faith and a framework that classified certain humans as requiring correction — and inside that framework, his care and his violence were not in opposition. They were the same gesture aimed in different directions.

He believed he was saving my father’s soul from corruption.

The soldiers came at dawn. My father walked to the execution square in Intramuros with the unhurried dignity of a man who had decided his bearing

was the one thing they could not confiscate without his permission. He found me in the crowd and looked at me for perhaps three seconds.

His lips did not move.

Live.

Four hundred years and I am still working out what he meant by that.

My current best understanding: not survival. Not endurance. The specific instruction to keep going until you find the people who show you why.

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Chapter 3

Batangas, 1944

“She figured me out in three weeks. She started leaving food on my pack. I asked her once why she bothered. She looked at me like I’d asked why the rain bothered falling.”

The mountains of Batangas in wartime smell like wet stone and burning rice and death in the specific quantity that makes it atmospheric rather than acute. I know this smell in the way you know a language you never consciously learned. It arrives before the recognition.

I had been Edgar Tala for eleven years. Quiet Edgar, competent Edgar — the unit’s night courier, fast and unquestioning, a man without a past that invited scrutiny.

Leonora Villanueva was the unit medic. Thirty-two years old, from Lipa, practical in the way of women who have had to be. She had the hands of someone who had been fixing broken things long before anyone trusted her with broken people.

She figured me out in three weeks.

Not through a confrontation. Through the accumulation of small observations that a mind built for medical diagnosis naturally organizes into conclusions. The night vision. The performance of eating at communal meals — technically correct, socially convincing, but technically correct in the way that a person who has studied eating performs it differently from a person who simply eats. The quality of my stillness when managing the hunger, which is not the stillness of calm but the stillness of something that has decided not to move, and the difference is visible if you know to look.

She did not confront me. She started leaving food on my pack at the end of each night’s work.

I asked her once why she bothered. She was re-bandaging a fighter's wrist at the time and she looked up at me with the specific expression of someone who has been asked a question that doesn't require an answer.

"Because you're clearly trying," she said. And went back to the wrist. That was the whole of it.

I asked her, on the fourth week — night watch, clear sky, the kind of mountain night that is beautiful in a way that feels personally offensive given everything happening below it — what she thought I was.

"Something old," she said. "Something without a clean name. Something that has been trying very hard to be less frightening than it is, probably for a long time."

"Does that frighten you?"

She considered this seriously. Leonora always considered things seriously. "It would frighten me if you were hurting people who didn't deserve it," she said. "Are you?"

"Not right now," I said. "I'm trying not to be. I can't guarantee I've never been."

"That's honest," she said. "Okay."

She went back to watching the treeline. I sat with the specific bewilderment of a creature that has been managed and feared and occasionally hunted and has just been given an okay by a thirty-two-year-old nurse from Lipa who made the whole thing sound like a reasonable policy decision.

I fed only on the Japanese dead in those six months. Every time, explicitly, because she had asked and I had answered honestly and I wanted the answer to remain honest.

The ambush came in November. Leonora pushed the youngest fighter out of the direct line. His name was Rodrigo. He became a schoolteacher. He had four children. He died at seventy-two.

She gave him fifty-five years.

I held her while she went. Four minutes. She said my real name — the one she had found by watching me — and then she was gone.

I did not feed. I let her go cleanly.

Eighty years later, a berbalang named Asog would tell me that Leonora had not blamed me. That she had said: tell him to stop holding up the ceiling.

I have been trying.



Chapter 3.5

The Night I Cannot Account For

*“There are things I have done that I will not dress in language.
Not because language fails them.
Because they deserve to be named exactly as they were,
and I am not yet finished deciding what that name is.”*

I need to tell you about Cebu, 1945.

I have not told anyone about Cebu, 1945. Not Leonora — she died before I would have been ready, which is cowardice wearing the clothes of circumstance. Not Asog, who knows the shape of it from the berbalang networks but has the discipline not to ask. Not Diwata, who will read this document and find this chapter and whose opinion of me will change.

I am recording it because this is a confession, and a confession that carefully curates what it confesses is just a performance of honesty.

Cebu, 1945. Two months after Leonora.

The hunger had been unmanaged for eight weeks. I have no excuse. I had managed it through worse. In 1672, in a Manila ravaged by smallpox, I held the boundary for eleven months. In 1863, in the earthquake’s aftermath. Each time I had found the discipline.

Eight weeks after Leonora I did not find it.

The man’s name was Arsenio Cruz. He was a collaborator — I tell myself this because it is true. He was responsible, by my count, for seven deaths: four resistance members he had informed on, three others taken for less specific reasons during a Tuesday when the Japanese administration needed to make a point. He was alive in Cebu and the seven people he had helped kill were not.

I tell myself I chose him for those reasons.

The true reason was simpler and worse: he was nearby, his fear-signal was strong, and I had stopped giving myself the eight seconds of deliberate choice that every other act of feeding had required.

He did not die. This is the detail I have been managing in the telling — the instinct toward the cleaner version of this story. He survived. He spent six weeks in a hospital in Mandaue with symptoms the doctors could not categorize, lost most of his vision in his right eye, and lived until 1987 when he died of a stroke at seventy-one.

I know this because I looked. I looked for thirty years because not looking was worse.

He survived and I stood in the street outside the house in Cebu at four in the morning with the hunger fed and the clarity that comes after, the specific cold clarity of having done something you understood was wrong before you did it and did it anyway.

I was not a monster.

I was something more difficult than a monster: a creature with full deliberative capacity who had made a choice in the direction of the thing he was most afraid of becoming.

The grief does not make it acceptable. The eight weeks of unmanaged hunger do not make it acceptable. Arsenio Cruz's culpability for other deaths does not make it acceptable.

I walked to the ocean at four in the morning and sat on the rocks until the sun came up and made myself hold the whole of what I had done without giving it a different name.

This is what I learned: I am capable of the thing I am most afraid I am capable of. That knowledge has not left me in eighty years. It is the most honest thing I can tell you about what I am.

I also learned that I could choose, afterward, what I did with the knowledge.

I chose the discipline. Every day since Cebu: the eight seconds, the deliberate choice, the management.

I have not failed since.

Whether that record matters, given the one exception, is not a question I am able to answer. Diwata will have an opinion about this chapter. I am recording it because her opinion, whatever it is, is her right, and hiding this from her would be a continuation of the thing that Cebu was: choosing my own comfort over the accuracy of what I am.

This is the record.

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Chapter 4

UP Diliman, 1972

*“Marisol disappeared on a Tuesday.
Not through drama. Through the specific bureaucratic mechanism of that period:
a seat that stayed empty, a voice that stopped being in the room.”*

I was Amado Tala at UP Diliman. Literature student, fourth year, three years into pretending to be twenty. The department head liked my papers on pre-colonial Philippine literature. He wrote in one assessment: “Amado writes about these texts as if he knew the period personally. Exceptional historical empathy.”

I nearly laughed when I read it. I thought about writing back: you have no idea.

I didn’t. Amado was not the kind of person who found himself funny.

My friends were ordinary young people who had decided the situation required a response. They argued about poetry and politics at two in the morning with the energy of people who still believed ideas had direct mechanical connections to the world. They made terrible coffee and held each other’s drafts to the light and disagreed loudly about things that would get them killed in six months.

Marisol was twenty-one, from Cebu, studying Political Science. She had a laugh that arrived before the joke finished landing because she always saw where things were going. She also had the habit, maddening to argue with, of immediately conceding any point she was wrong about and immediately restating the parts of her position that survived.

She disappeared on a Tuesday in September.

Not through drama. Through the specific mechanism of that period: the gap between a person being present and a person being gone. A seat that

stayed empty. A phone that rang without answer. A voice that stopped appearing in rooms.

By November there were four from my immediate circle.

I used my abilities twice. Both times the person I was helping survived. Both times I had to be gone before daylight explained what had helped them.

The third time, a colonel in a corridor saw my eyes change in the dark.

Recognition. Not fear — recognition. The specific cold alertness of someone who grew up with the old stories and has just understood that the stories were not fiction.

Three seconds of eye contact. I walked backward into the dark.

I burned Amado's student ID at the campus gate at three in the morning while fires burned somewhere across the city, and I walked out into thirty years of the careful minimal life.

Here is what I learned in those thirty years: the absence of unhappiness is not the same as the presence of peace. I had stopped wanting things and confused the numbness for contentment. I had systematically dismantled every attachment that might cost me something if lost.

The cost of never losing anything is never having anything to lose.

This is not a lesson. It is a description of a specific kind of poverty.

I was very poor for thirty years and called it wisdom.



Chapter 5

The Apartment

*“No mirrors. One mattress. A wall of records with an eleven-year gap.
Aling Nena once asked me if I was a widower.
I said no. She said: you have the apartment of one.”*

The building in Sampaloc has been a building since 1958 and is honest about it. Mildew in the stairwell. Pale-green Magsaysay-era tiles in the hallway. Sixty years of cooking layered into the walls.

Aling Nena owns it. She is seventy-one years old, has been managing residential tenants since 1989, and has the earned incuriosity of someone who has seen enough to understand that the most useful quality in a tenant is paying on time and not causing noise. She asked me once, early on, if I was a widower.

I said no.

“You have the apartment of one,” she said, looking at the no-mirrors bathroom, the single mattress, the shelf with the one cup.

She wasn’t wrong. I didn’t know what to say to it. I said thank you for the coffee she’d brought up with the receipt for the rent, and she looked at me for a moment with the expression of someone making a decision about whether to say something else, and then she didn’t, and went back downstairs.

I thought about it for three days.

The apartment: one mattress. The records arranged chronologically — 1948, 1959, and then the gap, 1972 to 2003, the eleven years where the sequence stops because I had reduced my investment in the world to its minimum and stopped acquiring things I loved. The gap is visible. It is not nothing.

No mirrors. I removed them because the twenty-two-year-old face had started to unsettle me — not for the supernatural reasons, I'd made my peace with those, but for the specific unease of a face that should show the weight of everything behind it and doesn't.

I was not unhappy. Unhappiness requires wanting something different. I had stopped wanting things.

Aling Nena was right, though. I had the apartment of someone who had decided to be finished with wanting.

That Tuesday I was developing photographs in the bathroom. Technically excellent work. The colonial arches at the Perez-Samanillo building, the light at exactly the angle I had returned four times to find. Precise. Emotionally inert. The work of someone who had learned to look without being changed by what they saw.

I didn't notice the difference until I saw hers.



Chapter 6

The LRT

*"Her camera glitched when it passed across me.
I noticed the man three cars back watching her, not me.
Hunters watch the quarry. When someone watches the person beside the quarry,
it means the person beside the quarry is the point."*

She was standing in the middle of the car with one hand on the overhead bar and her phone at the scratched window. Filming. Mouthing words — the specific rhythm of composition, not recall. A poem assembling itself in real time. Ink on the side of her left hand. Camera strap under the bag strap.

Twenty years old and fully present in the car in a way that most people are not — not performing presence, simply inhabiting the space. Her attention available to whatever was actually happening.

I was watching a pigeon work the platform. A creature that had mapped this location to its own purposes and moved through it without apology. It knew what it was. I had been having a complicated relationship with that kind of certainty for a long time.

Her camera glitched when the frame passed across me. I felt the sensor fail the way I always feel it — the small disturbance of attention encountering something it cannot categorize.

She frowned. Tapped the screen. Tried again.

And then I noticed the man three cars back.

He had been on the train since Monumento. Standing at the angle of someone surveilling the car ahead without appearing to. Body too still for rush hour. Head at the wrong elevation for the window he appeared to be looking at.

Not watching me.

Watching her.

Hunters watch the quarry. When someone watches the person beside the quarry, it means the person beside the quarry is the actual target. I had been hunted enough times to know the pattern immediately and without uncertainty.

She looked up from her screen and found my eyes directly. The look of someone who has found an inconsistency and finds that interesting. She raised her phone. The camera glitched again. She composed around the limitation — practiced, automatic, the adjustment of someone who works with what she has rather than stopping for what she doesn't have.

Her stop came. She stepped off without looking back.

The man three cars back rode two more stops and got off at Doroteo Jose and disappeared into the city.

I stood on the train and thought about what it meant that someone had been watching her watch me. The specific calculation of it. The patience of it — four full stops, maintaining the performance of not-watching.

Eleven days later, her message on the photography forum.

Four drafts. Three were no. The fourth was yes.

I sent it because the no was not about her. It was about what I was afraid the yes would require of me — the specific, expensive thing of becoming responsible for someone who was already walking toward the edge of something and didn't know it.

I sent it because the alternative was worse.



Chapter 7

Divisoria

*“The santelmo was not drifting. It had been sent.
Not to attack me. To create a situation she would photograph.
Someone was staging our first meeting.”*

The santelmo is a Philippine supernatural being: a ball of pale fire that is the trapped soul of someone who died without proper burial. They appear near rivers and bodies of water. They drift. They are drawn to grief.

They do not track.

The one in Divisoria was tracking.

I was there for thread — I repair my own clothes, it is meditative, my father was a craftsman and the needle is my version of his hammer. The santelmo found me at the third stall from the north entrance. Temperature drop on my left. The specific cold of something directed.

A ball of pale fire between two bolts of blue fabric, hovering at shoulder height. The vendors continued working around it. The human mind in high-density environments performs aggressive triage on what it admits to conscious attention. The santelmo did not make the cut.

But it wasn't drifting. It was moving toward me with the patient certainty of something that had been given an address.

Someone had sent it. That was a short list of capabilities, and the list told me most of what I needed to know.

It drew heat. Six people collapsed simultaneously. The tik-tik activated below the audible register — three of them, positioned in a triangle around me, producing the preparatory click that I hear as a specific, bone-deep signal. The hunger rose.

I went still. Became the space between things. Three seconds. The tik-tik lost the thread. The santelmo drifted off its line.

I walked out. At the edge of the market, I passed her.

She had her camera up, reviewing images. She had been in the market. She had photographed the collapse. And in one frame, she had caught me going still in the middle of the chaos, and the shadow in the frame was wrong.

I passed close enough to see the image on her screen. I kept walking. She did not look up.

That night I arrived at the answer: the santelmo had been deployed in a location she was likely to be documenting. Not to attack me. To create a situation that would put her in position to photograph an anomaly. Someone was engineering the conditions under which she would find me.

And someone who knew what she was before she did — who understood the Bantay ng Dugo bloodline was active in her, who needed her to find me — had a purpose for bringing us together.

That purpose was not benign.

The yes I sent eleven days later was not innocent optimism. It was the calculated decision of someone who understood that whatever was being built around her was being built regardless, and the question was whether she faced it with help.



Chapter 8

Yes

*"I wrote four drafts. Three were no. The fourth was yes.
I sent the yes because the no was not about her.
It was about what I was afraid the yes would require of me."*

The message arrived at eleven forty-seven PM. She had been researching me for four days — three hours of sleep per night, which she mentioned later as a fact, not a bid for sympathy.

She found me through the Luneta tree. She had photographed the same dead tree I had, from the south, in late afternoon. Her photograph made it look like something at a decision point. Mine documented what had already been decided.

She sent both images in the message. The comparison was the argument.

"I think you can see things I cannot yet see," she wrote. "I'm making a project about the unseen Manila — the people the city looks through every day. I think you understand what it means to be looked through."

Five times I read that sentence.

Four drafts. The first two were polite declines. The third was the honest one: I don't know how to be seen, I have been managing not-being-seen as a survival strategy for thirty years, I think you might be the kind of person who would be patient about that but I don't know how to ask you to be — and I deleted it in under a second and stared at the deletion for six minutes.

Then: Yes.

She replied in thirty seconds. Coffee. Saturday. You choose.

I chose Intramuros. Old walls. Light I knew best. The most controlled environment I could construct.

I also knew, by then, that whatever was being staged around her was not finished staging. That the santelmo in Divisoria, the man three cars back on the LRT, the directed photography forum trail — these were pieces of a pattern. And the pattern was not mine. Someone else had written it.

I was being invited into something.

I accepted because she was going to walk into it regardless. The question was whether she walked in with someone who understood the territory.

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ACT TWO

Ang Pag-Gising ng Dugo
The Awakening of Blood

Chapter 9

Intramuros

“Three minutes in, she caught something I hadn’t intended to give her.

I recalibrated. She noticed the recalibration.

“You just adjusted something,” she said.

“What?”

“What you were going to say next.”

She was right. I hadn’t expected her to be right that fast.”

She arrived five minutes early. I had been there for forty, at a table with a clear line to the door and the window.

She sat before she said anything — bag on the table, notebook open, pen in hand. The record starting before the conversation. This was simply how she moved through the world: instrument always ready, documentation continuous.

“You look exactly like your photographs,” she said.

Not hello.

“Is that good?” I asked.

“Means you’re consistent. Most people adjust slightly for in-person.”

She was already studying me from multiple angles of attention simultaneously.

“You don’t.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice being what I am.”

She wrote something in the margin without looking up. Then: “That’s interesting.”

“Is it.”

“Most people would say being myself. You said what I am. Not who.”

I had not noticed the distinction until she named it. She had found something I hadn’t intended to give her in the third minute of our first meeting. I adjusted what I was going to say next.

She noticed.

“You just adjusted something,” she said.

“What?”

“What you were going to say next.”

I looked at her. Twenty years old. Ink on her left hand. The look of someone who had been paying attention to things her whole life and had gotten very accurate at it.

“Yes,” I said.

“Okay,” she said. “That’s fine. Just — I noticed.”

She went back to her notebook. I recalibrated my estimate of how carefully I would need to proceed.

We talked for three hours. She asked the right questions in the right sequence. The colonial buildings, why specifically. I said: both aesthetics and something else. She asked what the something else was.

“I’ve been in this city long enough to be interested in what persists,” I said.

“How long is long enough?”

“Long enough that the question becomes personal.”

She held this. Filed it. Moved without pushing.

She showed me her poetry at the end of the second hour. Working drafts — crossed-out words, margins carrying a second conversation. One poem stopped me.

A woman who separates herself at the waist before going hunting. Who leaves her upper half in a tree. Who comes back at dawn to rejoin the waiting lower half.

She had written the manananggal without knowing she was writing the manananggal. The Bantay ng Dugo bloodline, surfacing through the only channel available to it.

“Where did this come from?” I asked.

“Dream,” she said. “Since I was a kid. I’ve written it three times. There’s a fourth version I can feel but can’t reach yet.”

“Some images are inherited.”

“From who?”

“The bloodline,” I said. “The people before you.”

She wrote this in the margin. She was filing it under Jungian archetypes — closest available framework, approximately correct. I knew the truth and did not say it.

That was my first failure of the many that were coming.

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Chapter 9.5

What She Didn't Say at the Museum

*"The honest version:
I was irritated about the destiny.
Not the danger. The assumption.
Like the universe had scheduled me without asking."*

What I did not tell Elias at the National Museum, and what I am writing here because the record should be honest even when the record is about me:

I was furious about the Tree of Life photograph for three days.

Not because he was wrong — he was right about the first shots. I knew that while I was looking at them. But there is a specific feeling when someone who has been alive for four hundred years tells you, gently and accurately, that your instinct was correct and the execution needs work, and the feeling is not gratitude. It is the particular irritation of being right and being shown you were right in a way that somehow still makes you feel like a student.

I came back for the overcast version because I needed to prove something to myself.

Not to him. To me.

The photographs were good. They were what I had been looking for. He said nothing, which was the correct thing to say, and I was annoyed by the correctness of his saying nothing.

That is the first flaw in the record: I spent two days being privately petty about being accurately helped.

The second: when he told me about the bloodline — the Bantay ng Dugo, the eight-century lineage, the thing I was built to be — my first response was not grief and it was not wonder.

It was resentment.

There is a version of this I am not proud of: I sat in the bathroom of my apartment for forty minutes, door locked, thinking: I didn't ask for this. I didn't agree to this. My mother kept this from me and she was killed before she could explain it and now I am the last of something I never had the chance to refuse, and the assumption that I will simply step into the role because the role requires stepping into is the same assumption that has been made about women in my family for eight generations and I am exhausted by it before it has even properly started.

I did not say this to Elias.

I said: okay, show me how it works.

Both of these things were true. The practical one and the one I locked in the bathroom with me for forty minutes.

This is the record. Diwata Reyes, age twenty, annotating her own history with the parts she didn't make look clean.

I am not a hero. I am a person who had no available option that wasn't also this, and I chose this with the resentment intact and the capability growing, and I am still deciding whether that counts.



Chapters 10–12

The National Museum • What She Wrote • Galan, Across the Street

These three chapters are retained in full from the Pass 7 manuscript. Key moments: Elias's certainty proven wrong over eight days by Diwata's photography instinct (Ch. 10); eleven poems containing bloodline knowledge she hasn't been taught, and Elias's first failure to simply tell her the poem is good (Ch. 11); and Galan across the street, looking tired in the specific way of a creature that has decided this is the year the grief gets set down (Ch. 12).



Chapter 12.5

Galan, Unraveling

*"I have seen things die for six hundred years.
Do not talk to me about patience.
Patience is what I had when there was still something left to be patient for."*

I did not expect what happened at the Pasig embankment on a Tuesday morning in February.

I found him there because Asog had tracked the displacement event to the embankment — a tikbalang footprint in the geography of the spirit world, enormous and unguarded, the spatial manipulation turned inward. A creature losing its grip on its own ability.

He was standing at the railing looking at the water. The balete-wood cane against the concrete. He was not performing anything. No signal in his posture. He was simply a very old creature looking at a river that had been changed past recognition.

He heard me approach. He did not turn.

"The original Pasig was three times this width," he said. "I have a memory of its banks in the 1400s. The bamboo was different. The sound was different. The engkanto who lived in it are gone — not dead, gone, which is a different disappearance."

I stood beside him.

"You're losing the spatial control," I said.

A long silence.

"Yes."

Then, without warning, he turned and grabbed me by the collar with both hands and slammed me against the embankment wall with a force that cracked the concrete behind me.

Not measured. Not a signal. Raw.

The horse-skull face six inches from mine. The jaw too long. The eyes — seven hundred years looking out of them, and underneath the calculation, the tiredness I had seen across the street, and underneath that, the thing the tiredness was a layer over: grief so old it had fossilized into something indistinguishable from rage.

“Seven centuries,” he said. The voice in two registers simultaneously — the human-adjacent one and the one beneath it, the older one, the one that made the air around us vibrate. “Seven centuries I have watched this world eat what it was. Road by road. Mall by mall. Every name that the old world had for itself, buried under a name the new world chose for it.”

He held me there.

“I had a forest,” he said. “From Bulacan to the edge of what is now the airport. I knew every tree. Every wet-season path. Every creature in it. It took sixty years to disappear and I watched every year of it. Not metaphorically. I watched it. I was there. The last tree that had been in that forest for four hundred years was taken down by a man with a chainsaw who had his lunch in a plastic bag and drove home in a secondhand Mitsubishi and felt nothing.”

He let go.

Stepped back.

Picked up the cane.

His hands were shaking. I had not thought his hands capable of shaking. The spatial manipulation trembling at the edges of him, the long-developed control compromised by the force of what he had just expressed.

“I am not a villain,” he said. Quietly. Back to the measured voice. “I am a creature at the end of a grief that has been accumulating for seven centuries and I have finally found the mechanism to make it stop.”

I looked at the cracked concrete.

“I know,” I said.

He looked at me.

“Do you.”

“I know the specific kind of grief you’re describing. I’ve been carrying a smaller version of it for four centuries. I know what it does to your relationship with the present tense. I know how the accumulated loss starts to feel like the only thing that defines you. I know the particular exhaustion of loving things that the world continues to decide are not worth keeping.”

He was quiet.

“I also know that the mechanism you’ve built will put twelve million people’s lives in danger. And those twelve million people are also what’s left. They are not nothing. Manila is inconvenient and loud and it has eaten everything that came before it. It is also real and full of people who did not choose to be born into a city that grew over your forest, and the grief that made the forest holy does not make the people expendable.”

The longest silence.

“You’ve chosen her,” he said.

“Yes.”

Something in the horse-skull face — not defeat. Something more complicated. The particular expression of a creature that has finally encountered the thing it needed to encounter to understand what it has been building toward.

He walked away.

I stood at the embankment with cracked concrete at my back and thought about grief and cities and the specific, agonizing question of what you do when the love you are defending has already been destroyed and the only available targets for the grief are things that grew in its place.

I did not have an answer.

I had, for the first time, the full weight of his position. Both true: the loss was real. The people were real. Neither cancelled the other.

That was the morning I began to understand how this would end.



Chapters 13–19

Paco • Seventeen Photographs • Father Isagani • The Rooftop • Galan's Offer • What She Said Next • The Architecture of the War

These chapters are retained in full from Pass 7 with Pass 9 refinements. Key scenes: Elias's eyes change at Paco and Diwata says same time Thursday (Ch. 13); seventeen photographs and her message at midnight — i found something and i am annoyed that you haven't told me (Ch. 14); Father Isagani's impossible equation (Ch. 15); the rooftop confession and how tired are you and Elias cries without warning (Ch. 16); Galan in the apartment stating logistics (Ch. 17); I know, she says, three months ahead of him (Ch. 18); Elias walking to Manila Bay and arriving, finally, at something to fight for (Ch. 19).



ACT THREE

Ang Traydor
The Betrayer

Chapters 20–28

Amang Itim • Asog • Sinta • The City Goes Blind • The Sigbin • Ten Days • Kalingap • Diwata, Alone in the Car • Miguel, and the Mistake

Act Three retained in full from Pass 7. Pass 9 additions: Asog's humor expanded in Chapter 21 — she says he's annoying about it with the specificity of someone who has been waiting eighty years to say it, and the delivery is earned. Diwata's visible fear added to Chapter 25 — her hands shake once during the duwende confrontation before she steadies them, and she doesn't mention it afterward. Chapter 27's ninety-second cry in the car is the emotional pivot of the act: scared, then stopped, then went. The going anyway is not impressive unless the scared part is also true.

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ACT FOUR

Ang Apoy na Hindi Susunog
The Fire That Will Not Burn

Chapters 29–31, 33–35

The Sanctuary • What I Am • Sinta • The River • Leonora in the Water • After • What Amang Itim Said

These chapters retained in full from Pass 7. Chapter 30 revised: Elias loses control for exactly four seconds during the verbal confrontation — not the managed stillness, the actual thing surfacing before the management reclaims it. One ugly, honest moment that earns the heroism that follows because the reader has seen what heroism costs him. Chapter 31 (Sinta) carries the emotional detonation the critique demanded: your father named you Tala because you were the only good thing he ever saw that didn't break when the world pushed against it. Chapter 32 (The River) delivers the physical catastrophe in four hundred years of unbroken navigation suddenly failing. Chapter 33 (Leonora in the Water) closes the grief arc: he's annoying about it, she said. Both true.



Chapter 30.5

The Fracture

*“There is a version of this where I say the right thing.
I know what the right thing is.
I said the wrong thing anyway.
The gap between knowing and doing is where I have lived for four hundred years.”*

After.

After the chamber and the resonance and the river. After the santelmos and Sinta dissolving into the light and Galan laughing as he went home. After the embankment and the ninety seconds in the car and the furious crying and come back and she did.

Three days after.

She came to the apartment and found the notebook.

Not my current notebook — the 1972 one. The one I had left on the shelf because the shelf held what I kept, and I had stopped distinguishing between things that were mine to look at and things that required permission to look at because for sixty years there had been no one to distinguish for. The distinction had atrophied.

She read it.

I came in from the darkroom and she was sitting on the floor with the notebook open to the November pages. The pages about Marisol. The pages about the three students who disappeared. The pages about the colonel in the corridor and what I had chosen to do after.

She looked up.

I saw immediately from her face that she had reached the Cebu entry.

“You were going to tell me about this.” Not a question.

“Yes.”

“When.”

I did not have a good answer. I had been carrying the intention to tell her for months and I had not told her and the gap between intention and action was the same gap it had always been and she could see it and she was right to see it.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I was working toward it.”

“Working toward it.” She closed the notebook. “You told me everything. You told me the engkanto and the aswang and 1621 and Leonora and thirty years of nothing. You said everything. And you left this out.”

“Yes.”

“Elias.” The full frontal attention, but different from usual. Not the look of someone noticing something interesting. The look of someone deciding how much damage has been done and whether it is recoverable. “I need you to understand that I have built an understanding of what you are on the complete version of what you told me. The complete version that turns out to be incomplete. So the understanding I built is—”

“I know,” I said.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what.”

“Say I know when you don’t yet know what I’m about to say. That is a management technique. You have been managing me and I have been thinking you were being honest and those are two different things.”

She stood. The notebook on the shelf.

“I need to leave and come back to this when I’m not angry.”

“You should be angry.”

“I know I should. That doesn’t mean I’ll think clearly while I am.” She stopped at the door. She did not look back. “I’ll come back. That’s not a

threat, it's a fact. But I need you to understand that when I come back we are starting from a different place than where I thought we were."

She left.

I sat on the floor in the space where she had been sitting and held the notebook and thought about the gap. The gap between knowing something needs to be said and saying it. The gap I have been living in for four hundred years.

It is not wisdom. It is fear wearing the clothes of caution.

She came back four days later.

She sat. She asked me to tell her about Cebu, in full, without management. I did.

When I finished, she was quiet for a long time.

"You were going to tell me," she said.

"Yes."

"But not because you felt you had to."

"No. Because you deserve to know what you're choosing."

Another long silence.

"I'm not going to tell you it's okay," she said. "Because it's not okay. It was a person, and it was your choice, and the reasons are real but they don't make it okay."

"I know," I said. Not managing. Actually knowing.

"I am also," she said, more quietly, "still choosing you. With the full version. That's what I came back to say."

She reached across the space between us.

Not forgiveness. Not erasure. The specific, hard thing: choosing someone in full knowledge of what you are choosing.

That is what she gave me.

I held it with both hands.



ACT FIVE

Ang Ibig Sabihin ng Imortal
The Meaning of Immortal

Chapter 36

The Waiting Room

*"I cannot forgive you today.
Not impossible. Not today. Not fast.
And not something I hand to you because you need it."*

Hospital waiting room, five in the morning. Fluorescent light. Chairs built for durability. A television cycling through programming nobody had chosen.

Through the exam room door, periodically: Miguel's voice describing the highland vegetable preparation to the doctor with the focused enthusiasm of someone sharing something genuinely worth sharing. The doctor was apparently taking notes.

Diwata in one chair. Father Isagani in the next chair with one empty chair between them.

I sat in the row behind. This was not my conversation.

Forty-five minutes of loaded silence.

"You were going to let him use me," she said.

No accusation. A fact.

"Yes," he said. No justification first. "I told myself you would survive. I made myself believe it."

"You don't know that."

"No. I don't."

"Why didn't you come to me?"

"Because I knew what you would do," he said. The effort of honesty that implicates you. "You would have refused to be used. You would have found another way that put yourself in greater danger. You always choose the

hardest version of the right thing because you are your mother's daughter, and your mother always chose the hardest version of the right thing."

He looked at his hands.

"She was killed for it. I have been terrified of you for six years because of how much like her you are."

The silence that followed had a different quality.

"He is not a monster," she said.

"I know," he said. Without qualification. "I have known it for longer than I admitted."

"Mama would have told me."

"Yes. She was ready."

"I cannot forgive you today," she said. "Not impossible. Not today. Not fast. Not something I hand to you because you need it."

"I know," he said.

"Miguel needs you. So guilt as a destination is not available."

"Yes. You're right."

She reached across the empty chair and put her hand on his briefly. Not forgiveness. A position: you are here. I know you are here. That is where we are.

He looked at the photograph of Ligaya in his wallet.

Miguel came out of examination with a bandage on his knee and a doctor's assessment of good health considering the circumstances. He sat between Diwata and Father Isagani without finding the configuration unusual.

He leaned against Diwata's side. She put her arm around him. He was asleep in four minutes.

She looked at me over his sleeping head.

I looked back.

We had time.



Chapter 37

The Last Recording

*“Four hundred years. What is the most important thing you learned?
From the next room, her voice — patient, warm, absolutely certain.
The landlord is never prepared for all of her.”*

March. Five months after the ritual. The filmmaker came back.

Same borrowed apartment. Same plastic chair. Same forty-second flicker. I was counting again before I noticed.

“Where did we stop?”

“Seven months ago. Mid-sentence about the LRT.”

“Do you want to go back there?”

“No. We can finish from here.”

She looked at me across the camera. Something in the quality of my occupation of the chair had changed — not the face, the face doesn’t change, but the way I was in the room.

“You look different,” she said.

“I feel different.”

From the next room: her voice. Arguing with the landlord about natural light designations, with the patient warmth and absolute certainty of someone who has examined the situation from all available angles and arrived at the correct position.

The landlord was receiving the full measure of her attention. This was both a gift and a formidable experience.

“She argues with landlords,” I said.

“Does she win?”

“Every time. She brings herself completely to the argument. Landlords are generally not prepared for someone bringing themselves completely to an

argument about lease conditions.”

The filmmaker settled back. “Four hundred years. What is the most important thing you learned?”

I thought about my father grinding silver at four in the morning. About Leonora: are you dangerous to people who don’t deserve it. About a rooftop and a hand on my arm and: how tired are you.

About a river. About: one more time, up.

About Sinta: you should let people see you.

About a notebook on the floor. About: I am still choosing you. With the full version.

“That surviving and living are different activities,” I said. “The difference is other people. You cannot do the second one alone, regardless of how good you get at the first.”

From the next room: the landlord conceding. Her voice gracious and definitive.

“Love,” I said. “The kind that sees all of it — the complete and complicated whole of what you are — and chooses it in full knowledge of what it is choosing. That love is not a vulnerability. It is the only immortality that means anything.”

I stopped.

“Not the endless extension of a body through time,” I said. “That’s duration. Immortality is what happens when someone knows you — really knows you — and that knowing outlasts you.”

From the next room: the call ended. The notebook opening.

“I finally understand what my father saw,” I said.

“What did he see?”

“Something worth the cost,” I said. “Without calculating the risk. He saw something worth every cost available and he chose it with both hands.

'Then he sent me forward to find the people who would show me why.'"

The interview ended.

Outside, Manila continued. Permanent. Improbable. Persisting.

I have been watching this city for a very long time.

I am not finished.



Chapter 38

Twenty Years Later

*“He is still twenty-two. She is forty.
He has learned to surf badly. She has six hundred photographs of him falling.
Neither of them has decided what to do with those photographs.
They are keeping them.”*

This chapter is in the third person. The only section in the third person. Deliberate.

Elias has spent four centuries in the first person. The meticulous, perpetually self-aware interior of a creature who has survived everything by staying close to his own perspective and carefully managed in relation to everyone else's. The first person has been shelter and cage.

This chapter belongs to what becomes visible when you finally let people see you. The evidence that you exist in other people's experience as fully as you exist in your own.

The book was published in December, twenty years after the night in the Intramuros sanctuary.

She had spent nineteen years writing it. The first year in recovery and documentation. The next eighteen in the slower work of understanding what it meant — the full shape of a thing only visible from far enough away.

She called it ImMORTAL: The Cost of Remembering Forever. The typography was an argument with her publisher that lasted four months. The Im set slightly smaller and lighter, positioned within the larger MORTAL: so that ImMORTAL was what you saw at ordinary reading speed, and then — if you looked with the specific attention she had been bringing to everything since she was twenty on an LRT with a glitching camera — you saw the Im Mortal nested inside it. Both things in the same word.

She had been holding both things in the same word for twenty years. Published in English first. Then Filipino. Then thirty-two other languages in two years.

She was forty. She wore it the way she wore everything — with the specificity of someone who had decided what it meant and was proceeding accordingly.

She taught at UP. Courses oversubscribed every semester. She taught close reading as a survival skill. She believed this. She was right.

Elias still appeared to be twenty-two. Two relocations from Manila since the documentary. They were in Siargao now — a house near the water, a barangay with its own working relationship with things that didn't fit available categories.

He surfed. A neighbor named Ronnie had offered to teach him, assuming four centuries of bodily experience would translate.

It did not.

He fell off the board with a consistency that Ronnie found both baffling and endearing.

He surfed every afternoon anyway. The patient stubbornness of a creature that has been doing things it wasn't certain it could do for a very long time and has arrived at the conclusion that uncertainty is not a reason not to try.

Diwata photographed him falling. Every afternoon. Six hundred photographs. Neither of them had decided what to do with them. They were keeping them because some things are worth keeping — not for what they look like, but for what they are.

Father Isagani was well. Retired, near Miguel, who was twenty-eight and had become an urban farmer with strong opinions about every vegetable in his care. On Sundays, quietly, he taught people to cook the highland preparation

Galan had taught him. When asked where the recipe came from, he said: from someone I knew.

This was accurate.

The forgiveness between Diwata and Father Isagani took three years. A Sunday when she drove to his house and said everything she hadn't yet said, and he heard all of it, and they built from that conversation forward — not what they had before, because what they had before included the lie. Something honest. Something worth having.

She called him on Sundays. He answered on the first ring.

Amang Itim remained in his tree. He sent occasional notes. Brief, pointed, accurate. As always.

The boundary between the human world and the spirit world held. Diwata held it — not alone, through the network she had been building since her training. A community of practice rather than a bloodline requirement.

The record was kept. The documentation continued. The book was its own form of it — the one that carried all of it forward into minds that had not lived it.

She had made the record.

She was already making the next one.



Chapter 39

The Photograph of Leonora

*“He holds it carefully. He does not cry.
He sets it on the shelf beside the photograph of Diwata on the LRT.
He goes back to developing film.
This is enough.
This is, finally, exactly enough.”*

The darkroom in the Siargao house is a converted bathroom — the same arrangement he has used since the 1960s. Most nights, after Diwata has gone to sleep, he goes to the darkroom.

He was developing the coastline series. The quality of light at the hour when the water and sky match each other so precisely that the horizon between them disappears.

He had been trying to catch this for three weeks. He had not yet arrived at it in a way that satisfied him. This did not trouble him. He had been pursuing difficult photographs for more than seventy years. The pursuit is sometimes as valuable as the capture, and sometimes more.

The photograph emerged in the developer bath.

He did not recognize it.

He went still — not the practiced stillness, the genuine stillness of someone struck by something unexpected.

A carinderia. Wartime fluorescent light — yellow-ivory, the specific hum of it visible in the shadows. A woman, her head turned, laughing at something not yet finished landing. Her hands on the table.

Medic’s hands.

He knew her hands.

He had not taken this photograph.

He stood in the darkroom for a long time.

He thought about the spirit world's relationship with time. Not linear — more like a landscape than a sequence. A message can take eighty years to arrive because the delivery waits for the receiver to be ready.

He lifted the photograph from the bath with the care he brought to all photographs.

He dried it.

He placed it on the shelf.

And looked at what was already there.

A photograph from twenty-three years earlier: Diwata on the LRT, one hand on the overhead bar, phone at the scratched window. Filming. Mouthing words — the poem still in the head, still being made. The ink on the side of her left hand.

The two photographs.

Leonora laughing in the carinderia light in 1944, her gaze directed at someone the frame cannot show.

Diwata at twenty on the LRT, her gaze directed at a city she was in the process of understanding.

Eighty years between them. Both of them looking toward something. Both of them bringing the full measure of their attention to the world in front of them without managing the attention or rationing it or directing it away from the difficult parts.

He stood in the darkroom and held both photographs with his eyes.

He did not cry. The grief does not go. It is as present as it was in 1944 and it will be present for as long as he is. That is the cost he had been warned about and the cost he had paid and the cost that turned out to be worth paying.

The cost of remembering everything forever.

The cost of loving people in a body that does not stop.

He held it — the way you hold something precious, with both hands, without crushing.

He went back to developing film.

Outside, the ocean was doing what it has always done: moving and moving and moving, with the permanent energy of something that has never once required a reason to continue.

He was tired.

He was the most alive he had been in four hundred years.

He was not surviving.

He was living.

His father had known this. Had sent him forward into it with one word.

Live.

Not: endure. Not: persist. Not: manage.

Live.

He had been learning what that meant for four hundred years.

He was still learning.

He was grateful for the length of the learning.



Epilogue

*“To live forever is not to never die.
It is to never be forgotten by the one who truly saw you.
My mother left me. My father died.
Everyone I have ever loved has become memory.
But memory is not absence.
Memory is the only immortality that means something —
not the endless extension of a body through time,
but the permanent installation of a soul
in the mind of someone who chose to know it.
She chose to know me.
So I am, finally, for the first time in four hundred years,
not surviving.
Living.”*

*— Elias Tala Navarro
from the documentary record*



Author's Note

The creatures in this novel are real.

Not real in the way that requires a flashlight to verify, but real in the way that matters more: they are the accumulated stories of a people. The mythology of an archipelago. The specific genius of a culture that understood, long before the Western gothic tradition formalized its own monsters, that what we fear is not evil but consequence — that horror is not the arrival of

something foreign but the recognition of something familiar in a form the familiar has never taken before.

The Philippines has one of the richest supernatural traditions in the world. The engkanto, the aswang, the tikbalang, the kapre, the sigbin, the santelmo, the berbalang, the pugot, the duwende, the tik-tik, the manananggal — these are not my inventions. They belong to the Philippine archipelago and to the oral traditions and folklore of a people who used them to make sense of grief and hunger and loss and the specific terror of a colonial history that tried very hard to erase them. They are still here. They have always been here.

I have taken liberties. I have given these beings inner lives the traditional accounts do not specify, motivations the legends leave open, relationships that are my own construction. I have tried to do this with the care that borrowed mythology deserves — with respect for what these stories carry, and with the humility of someone who knows that using another culture's sacred materials is a privilege rather than a right.

The Philippine history in this novel is real. The Spanish colonial administration, the Japanese occupation, the Martial Law period — these happened. The targeting of intellectuals, activists, and indigenous knowledge-keepers during those periods was real and its effects are ongoing. If this novel makes any single historical claim, it is this: the things that were taken during those periods have not finished being lost, and the people who kept them have not finished being needed.

Elias survives. The Philippines survived. These are not small things. They are, in a very specific sense, each other.

This novel was written in Angono, Rizal — a place that has always understood, in its bones, that the visible world and the world beneath it are the same world, breathing.

— *Marc Reginald A. Alo*
Angono, Rizal, Philippines



Glossary of Filipino Lore

Engkanto

The ethereal spirit beings of the old Philippines — associated with balete trees, rivers, mountains, the wild spaces. Not ghosts but a separate order of being, older than the colonial names for things. They can appear fully human. Extended presence in the human world makes them human, which they regard as their most feared fate. Elias's mother was engkanto.

Aswang

The most feared beings in Philippine folklore — a broad category of supernatural creatures united by their predatory relationship with humans. Not a single creature but a spectrum. The aswang nature can be inherited, existing in permanent tension with the human nature it shares a body with. Elias manages his aswang inheritance through specific techniques learned over four centuries. The hunger is always present.

Manananggal

A specific aswang variant that separates at the waist at midnight, sprouting bat-like wings. The lower half is left behind. Salt or ash applied to the lower half before dawn prevents rejoining and destroys the creature. Elias's mother was manananggal.

Tikbalang

A horse-headed humanoid creature of enormous size and strength. Bound by nature to specific territory. Loss of that territory produces disorientation that spreads across the surrounding field. This is what happened to Galan. The loss was incremental, road by road, over centuries.

Kapre

A giant tree-spirit, pipe-smoking, identity inseparable from the specific tree or grove they inhabit. Not inherently malicious, but capable of enormous consequence when disrespected. Amang Itim has been in the same corner of Binondo for two hundred years.

Sigbin

A creature resembling a hornless goat that walks backward and feeds on the soul-shadow's capacity for supernatural discernment. Victims lose perception incrementally. The weapon deployed against Ligaya Reyes.

Santelmo

Balls of pale fire that are the trapped souls of people who died without proper burial. Found near rivers. Drawn to grief. The santelmos in the Pasig River recognized Elias's centuries of accumulated loss as something close to their own.

Berbalang

Grave-eating creatures with the ability to project an astral double while their real body sleeps. Berbalang communities maintain strict internal covenants. Asog is berbalang.

Pugot

Headless entities moving in directionless force. People who died without their heads returned for proper burial, held in incomplete death. Kalingap waited twenty-three years for the person who could receive what he had died trying to deliver.

Duwende

Small earth spirits inhabiting mounds, old trees, or the spaces beneath houses. Easily offended. Their curses manifest as illness, nosebleeds, joint

pain, and the specific insomnia that feels like being watched from a direction you cannot identify.

Tik-Tik

A specific aswang variant that mimics human sounds to lull prey into lowered vigilance. Named for the preparatory clicking sound it produces below the range of human hearing.

Bantay ng Dugo

The Blood Watchers. A human lineage bred over eight centuries to maintain the balance between the human and spirit worlds. Diwata is the last trained practitioner, and she is building toward something that doesn't require being born into a specific family to participate in.

Diwata

Divine beings or nature spirits of the highest order in Philippine supernatural hierarchy. They created the Bantay ng Dugo lineage. The name is also a Tagalog word for fairy or divine being. Her mother knew what she was naming her.

Balete

The sacred fig tree. Central to Philippine supernatural geography. Not a metaphor for the spirit world's presence. The spirit world's address. Two hundred years from now, the balete tree in Binondo will still be on that corner.



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